

Talking about September 11: Sometimes even dispute resolution professionals may need help

By Douglas Stone and Sheila Heen

In the wake of September 11, there is much to talk about. You may find yourself answering your children's questions about whether it's safe to go to school, talking with colleagues about your firm's business plan in an uncertain economy, discussing the "war on terrorism" with neighbors or students who have very different views, or talking to a friend or family member who feels deeply depressed or anxious.

Just as we need assistance rebuilding our physical infrastructure, we need assistance with how to have these conversations. This assistance is necessary, we believe, even for those of us who are devoted by disposition or profession to the task of dispute resolution. Over the last few days and weeks, we've found ourselves failing to use some of the skills we ordinarily take for granted when we're working to help others talk things through. It's one thing to bring skills to bear as a third party, and something else entirely when our own passions and anxieties are implicated. This article offers a few thoughts to keep in mind as you have your own conversations.

We all react differently

Tragedy brings out different things in different people. Some people react by withdrawing from their daily routine, feeling that the very meaning of what they do each day has shifted. Others find solace in familiarity and may throw themselves into their work, hobbies, or volunteer activities. Some may become depressed, while others experience a new sense of appreciation for what they have. Some people feel an intense rage and may want revenge at any cost, while others feel a deep sadness and may hope that no one else will have to die.

A mediator we know described struggling with her own thoughts during a mediation that took place a week after the attacks. "I remember just sitting there thinking, I can't believe they're having this same argument for the 47th time! This is so unbelievably petty in light of what's going on." Her co-mediator felt just the opposite: "The recent events make me appreciate the fact that I'm in a job where I can help people."

Many of us have found ourselves judging the reactions of others. You may feel annoyed or worse when you receive an e-mail from opposing counsel that fails to ask how you are coping with the events of recent weeks. "I asked them how they were doing, and they don't have the courtesy to respond like a human being," you might think. Or maybe you have a colleague who talks about nothing but the attacks, long after you've gotten on with the rest of your life. You file this away as nothing more than your colleague overreacting once again.

Past experiences shape our reactions

It's easy to assume, of course, that our reaction is the right reaction. After all, from where we sit, inside our skin, our reaction makes sense to us. And other people's reactions may not. Often, we unconsciously assume that everyone should react to events in just the same way we do, and on the same timetable. But we need to remember that what happened on September 11 is not really the same event for everybody. Of course, the event affected people differently in the literal sense, but in addition, we each make our own meaning out of what happened. We each treat that day as the continuation of the story of our individual lives. For one person, the tragedy may evoke memories of her parents' divorce, for another it may trigger flashbacks of his experiences while fighting in Vietnam, and for a third, it may heighten the everyday sadness of living alone.

Consider the painful argument between two of our colleagues, one a senior academic and the other, one of his younger colleagues. The senior academic was working on a plan that might facilitate a peaceful resolution to the conflict, while the younger colleague argued that "negotiation can't solve everything — sometimes you have to use your BATNA." The senior academic speaks from vivid memories of personal losses wrought by World War II, while his younger colleague sees the events through the lens of his brother, a reservist who has been called up and is ready to contribute to the military effort.

So whether or not the reactions of others make sense to you, you can be confident that there is more going on behind the scenes for them emotionally than is apparent to you.

Our reactions are tied to our identity

Past experiences shape our emotional reactions and coping mechanisms, especially in times of uncertainty. But there is a second, equally important driver of our responses, one related to our self-images. Our reactions make more sense when examined in light of the stories we tell ourselves about the kind of people we are.

A friend recounts the conversation she had with her husband about the September 22-23 weekend: "There were reports that an attack was planned in Boston for the coming weekend, and I wanted to get out of the city, to head north, with the kids. My husband adamantly refused, telling me I was being silly and nothing was going to happen. We came to a stalemate, with each of us incredulous at the other's view."

As the two talked further, it became clear that much of the disagreement was rooted in their differing identities. "We were each reacting to what this decision 'to go or not to go' said about us. I was thinking, 'How can I be a responsible parent and put my child in harm's way' no matter how small the risk? I could never forgive myself if something happened.' Meanwhile my husband was thinking, 'I'm not the kind of person who can be intimidated. I'm not going to let these terrorists chase me out of town!'"

Whether the decision-making occurs at home or in the workplace, our views are going to be guided in part by what the decision says about the kind of people we are. In the face of a worsening economy, one person may oppose layoffs, believing that he has to be optimistic, or that loyalty is crucial precisely in times like these.

Another may see herself as the type capable of making the tough decisions, and she may believe that layoffs are crucial to the survival of the firm. One person may be comfortable — perhaps even adamant — about going on that business trip or taking that vacation, while another sees travel as a foolish risk. Understanding the roots of these conflicts means talking about their implications for each person's identity.

We all strive to act consistently with our identities, yet during times of tragedy, our identities not only shape our reactions, they can also create added anxiety and confusion. Many of us in the field of dispute resolution identify ourselves as good communicators, and paradoxically, this identity can actually create problems. You may think of yourself as the kind of person who is helpful to others, particularly around emotional issues. At the same time, if you have a colleague who is suffering, you may be unsure about what to say. So you think, "Well, I'm not quite sure how to approach them, so maybe I'll just assume everything is fine. Best not to raise it."

But it's better to take the identity risk and speak up. After all, being good at dispute resolution doesn't necessarily make us experts in trauma or depression, and even experts are sometimes at a loss for "just the right way" to raise tough issues. In most cases, even if your attempt to be helpful is clumsy, the other person will recognize your good intentions.

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Suggested pullquotes

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